

# Sexually transmitted diseases in Thailand

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## Thailand

Thailand is an independent kingdom in south east Asia, formerly known as Siam. The name Muang T'ai means land of the free people and, modified to Thailand, was adopted in 1939. The country is mountainous in the north, barren in the east, but has a central fertile alluvial plain and a long narrow hilly strip in the south, which is part of the Malay peninsula.

Rice is by far the most important crop but others include sugar, cotton, tobacco, and teak. Life in Thailand used to be easy. The climate is hot, the land fertile, and there are few natural disasters such as typhoons, floods, or earthquakes. As a result the people have cultivated a great sense of relaxation and fun (the art of "sanuk") because they could always rely on there being fish in the streams and rice in the fields. Over 90% of them are Buddhist and there are beautiful coloured temples and shrines everywhere.

There is a very popular Royal Family and free democratic elections have been held recently. Thailand faces many problems as the economic gap between the rich and poor is too great for comfort, and until recently there were strong communist influences and subversion in the north east and the south. Relations with neighbouring Laos, Cambodia, and Burma have not been easy, but throughout their history the Thais have managed to preserve their independence and their own way of life by diplomatic skill and negotiation.

Throughout Asia cultural patterns and traditional values are being challenged and eroded by Western materialism and rapid political change. This is particularly true in Thailand, where the conflict between new ideas and specially delightful old traditions has led to the adoption of foreign social and material attitudes at a rapid pace. Television, foreign films, and video tapes are replacing the festivities of the temple and the village as the most common source of entertainment, and the Thais are having to make radical changes in lifestyle which threaten their easy going, happy approach to life.

The population of Thailand is about 44 million, and sprawling, noisy, polluted Bangkok has over four million inhabitants, who seem to be involved in a perpetual gigantic traffic jam despite the construction of many new roads and overpasses. Bangkok is a city of superficial glamour with its modern hotels, bars, shops, massage parlours, and massive business premises, but the frequent slum areas are never far away and street prostitution is common. At night the glitter of the capital advertises the "good life" in massive neon signs. Taxis, private cars, buses, and three wheel samlor taxis ply their way along the avenues and streets taking the growing number of tourists and businessmen to restaurants, night clubs, cinemas and, above all, to the famous massage parlours.

The outlying country is quite different with peaceful, sleepy villages and a few small towns. One of these is Chiangmai, Thailand's second largest city, in the mountains of the north over 1000 feet above sea level. There is a medical school at Chiangmai University and the commercial areas of the town are expanding, but ancient crafts and skills are preserved in weaving, woodcarving, silverware, and umbrella making. Another town is Haadyai in the deep south of the country. It is a rich commercial city with a tradition of trading in cloth, Thai silks, cotton, and batik. It too has a medical school which is part of a huge new hospital development.

## MEDICAL SERVICES

There is no national health service and patients pay for medical attention according to their means. Those who really cannot afford to pay will receive hospital treatment without charge. There is a Minister of Public Health and a Director General of the Department of Communicable Diseases, as well as a venereal diseases division of the Department of Health which administers nine regional STD centres, 57 provincial STD clinics, and eight STD clinics in Bangkok and its suburbs. The policy of the Ministry of Public Health is to integrate all STD control activities in the provinces into the local health services.

The STD clinic at the Bangrak Hospital in Bangkok is a model clinic and, despite the great number of patients, the standards of medicine

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Accepted for publication 2 August 1983

practised in the hospital are of the very highest. The Director of Bangrak Hospital, Dr Kanchana Panikabutra, is an active working clinician and has established a clinic of international reputation for its standards of patient care, teaching of undergraduate and postgraduate medical students, and research. There is a well established laboratory service for serological tests for syphilis, cultures for gonorrhoea, and a developing service for chlamydia. Despite the great difficulties, contact tracing is energetically carried out with surprisingly good results in many instances.

The hospital and clinic are being enlarged at the present time as the number of patients attending the clinic continues to increase. It is evident that more trained medical staff are required if standards are to be maintained and the diseases controlled. Bangrak Hospital is the model on which all other STD clinics in Thailand should be based in the future.

#### SPECIAL PROBLEMS

There is a very high incidence of prostitution in Thailand despite the fact that it was made illegal in 1966. In Bangkok and other large towns large scale commercial prostitution still exists illegally and plays a major role in the spread of STD in the country. Over 70% of patients with STD seen at government clinics have had recent contact with prostitutes. They move frequently from place to place, often from province to province, under the control of brothel managers. Occasionally they are arrested by the police and are sent to clinics for examination and treatment. The total number of prostitutes is unknown but over 69 000 are seen at the clinics each year and their attendances are infrequent and irregular. That figure only represents the tip of a huge iceberg.

There has been a lot of discussion as to why there are so many Thai prostitutes, why they are so good at their job, and why Bangkok has become the sexual holiday centre of the world. There is general agreement that a major factor is poverty in the large families of the farming community, especially in the north east and north. Girls from Chiangmai and the north have a reputation for being the most physically beautiful and sexually attractive in the whole country and are the most sought after by the connoisseurs because of their alleged enthusiasm for the job. Another factor may be that Buddhism is the only major religion in the world which does not specifically prohibit and condemn prostitution, and in fact takes

a very tolerant attitude to it. Strong guilt feelings are not generated by prostitution, and it is a way of life in Thailand which brings a higher standard of living, a certain recognition in society, and easy, quick money.

Male prostitution is still poorly recognised even in the capital but bars, night clubs, and steam baths with a marked homosexual atmosphere exist in many places. Part time prostitution by both sexes is increasingly frequent and the money is used to pay the bills for a rapidly rising standard of living.

Some factors which are thought to be important in the high level of STD include lack of knowledge and understanding of its nature and extent. Inadequate training of doctors in the subject at medical schools, self medication with inadequate treatment, and failure to carry out tests of cure have resulted in the development of antibiotic resistant strains of gonococci, especially to penicillin, and the need to use more expensive and more toxic drugs in treatment.

#### THE FUTURE

Thailand has established itself as one of the most popular holiday countries in south east Asia. Bangkok is one of the major sex holiday centres in the world and the number of tourists, businessmen, and technicians visiting the city has increased steadily over the past ten years. Favourite entertainment places for visitors are night clubs, bars, massage parlours, and steam baths all of which are peopled by prostitutes and clients, who are at high risk of infection with STD. Homosexuality is being recognised more frequently, and there is an increasing problem with antibiotic resistant strains of bacteria causing STD.

Nevertheless, thanks to foresight of the Ministry of Public Health, Thailand has a well established infrastructure on which to develop a sophisticated and effective STD control programme. Better facilities for diagnosis and treatment, improved contact tracing, more education in STD for medical students, doctors, nurses, and for the general public, and improved facilities for research are the main areas for which increased resources should be made available. If this were to take place based on the present nationwide organisation already developed by the venereal disease division of the Department of Communicable Disease Control, Thailand could become a leader in STD control in south east Asia.